



Paolo Portoghesi, one of the many exciting photographs performing the spatial dynamic of Francesco Borromini's architecture. The wide-lens of the camera enables a paradox view from the lantern into the central space of the church Sant'Ivo in Rome, since the narrowest space in reality appears here as the widest one. From: Paolo Portoghesi, *Roma Barocca*, American ed., Cambridge/Mass., MIT Press 1970

performing space through photography

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Photography used as a tool within the architectural design process has been little studied so far. Yet, since photography implies a discourse in itself, it may turn out as being far more than a tool. By comparing two major examples the essay wants to show how the use of photography allows architects to rather perform their design ideas than merely represent them, and how the traditional architectural discourse –in particular modernism vs. postmodernism– becomes challenged. On the one hand there is Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who pasted various photographs from newspapers and magazines in his design drawings furnishing them with an extraordinary modern atmosphere. But, as a consequence, the inherent dislocation of space and time shifts slightly the whole collage into what almost might be called a postmodern simulacrum. On the other hand there is Paolo Portoghesi who always wanted to overcome modernism's ignorance towards architecture's past. Despite the fact that photography has been considered as the modernist way of seeing the world, he exemplified this position by publishing a series of books on baroque architecture in Italy, equipped with compelling photographs taken by himself. They carry the reader off into the rich and tempting world of Roman baroque applying all available means of modernist photographic techniques and tricks. It will be shown that the modernist Mies and the postmodernist Portoghesi use similar visual material and techniques, but the way their photographic techniques are embedded in the broader visual discourse shifts their meaning from "seeing photographically" to the "photographic gaze".

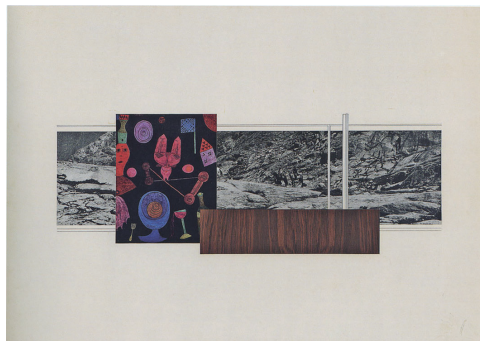
keywords Photography as design tool, Space-time, Performance, Modernism, Postmodernism, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Paolo Portoghesi

media architecture

According to Beatriz Colomina the involvement of technical produced images into the design process has fundamentally changed the production of architecture. Following Walter Benjamin she concludes that the possible “mechanical reproduction” of any work of art¹ has distinguished “building” and “architecture”. Distinct from the practice of building, architecture has become “an interpretative, critical act, [...] a project in itself, a veritable production”². Architects who use photography within their design process involve a reflective and critical mirror, which intellectualises their work. Reversely, they also might use photography in order to predetermine the future interpretation and critique of their work. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s and Paolo Portoghesi’s photographic design strategies are good examples of this kind of “media architecture”. In both cases photography seems to reflect *and* constitute the spaces and forms of their architecture. But photography also might change the meaning of their architecture, since photography has a discourse in itself³. It is particular postmodernism’s challenge of the relationship between reality and representation, which led to a broader theoretical and philosophical interpretation of photography⁴. With the following analysis, the essay will subsequently discuss the two major examples according to this theoretical frame.

mies’s collages

They are well-known and have been often analysed and interpreted: the conceptual design collages by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, produced for the ‘Resor House’ in Wyoming (1939), for his study ‘Museum for a small city’ (1942) or for the National Gallery in Berlin (1968). The most interpreters emphasise the way the pasted photographs dominate the picture, whereby the underlying freehand drawings of the buildings’ structures almost disappear. Indeed, they are fine examples for the critical relationship between handmade images and technically produced images. Even though the different motifs of the photographs always play a significant role, as Neil Levine has superbly analysed⁵, Mies seems to be also perfectly aware about the technical and artistic means of photography⁶. He uses the medium not only for representational purposes, but also in order to play an ingenious game with space and time that allows the observer to immediately experience the intended construction of a modern space.



f1_Mies van der Rohe

Resor House, 1939, design collage showing the view to the south (Ó Bildrecht, Vienna, 2016)

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There is one Resor House collage (**f1**), where this effect might be studied in detail. In the view to the south three photographs contrast with the blank drawing lines of the columns and of the horizontal planes of floor and ceiling: in the foreground an enlarged colour reproduction of Paul Klee's painting *The Colorful (or Gay) Repast* and a copy of a wooden veneer serving as a bar, and in the background a black and white photograph of the mountains with two cowboys in the scene. The carefully orchestrated composition creates an effect of "spatial discontinuity and sense of alienation", Neil Levine has remarked⁷. It is obviously caused by the minimisation of perspectival depth, which seems to be the result of the completely lacking middle ground reference. But it is also owed by the fact that the relationship between foreground and background is not conveyed by the measurement rules of the drawing, since the enlargement of the Klee painting and the enlargement of the wooden bar are disproportionate. Their size was caused by the exterior technical program of the camera. And also the background photograph does not fit in the measurable dimensions of the drawing. Although the drawing suggests a panorama view through the large horizontal openings, the photograph shows a forced perspective, since the two cowboys in the mountains have been taken with a telephoto lens – a paradoxical effect.

Contrary to what one would expect in architectural design images, it turns out that the drawing does not provide "the neutral two-dimensional ground for the free-standing objects in the room"⁸. Each element of the collage – photographs *and* the drawing – has its own logic of spatial and temporal relationships. Distance and proximity cannot be measured in the ordinary way but have to be experienced by assigning the different objects in the picture to one another. The observer is invited to inhabit the picture's own logic of space and time – somewhat hallucinatory, as Vilém Flusser might have put it⁹, but indeed a modern space, a space that has become a superimposition between the physical space outside and the space in our mind, which is increasingly governed by the media and their permanent pasting and cutting of different images. Mies's collages have introduced a new conceptual type of design 'drawing', which is not the representation of the measurable reality of a residential house, but rather the performance of the design idea.

Hence, by independently relating the photographs to various topics and objects the observer becomes also the user, "the one who [gives] meaning to the work"¹⁰. Even though, it seems to be true that "modern architecture becomes 'modern' [...] by engaging with the media"¹¹, it is ironically this involvement of the media in Mies's collages that seems to lead to the beginnings of a discourse, which two or three decades later had become manifest as postmodernism. It is not the postmodern architectural discourse – which was limited to stylistic terms –, but rather the discourse of media and culture theory, which challenged the relationship between representation and reality and between identity and difference. In Mies's collages there is an inherent questioning of originality and authorship, strengthened by the fact that nothing is said about the sources of the photographs. From this perspective the picture seems to be almost a simulacrum, a copy of copies in its own right. At least it is another modern practice, which challenges any radical distinction between modernism and postmodernism.

portoghesi's photographs of baroque architecture

It seems as if the Roman architect Paolo Portoghesi has a completely different photographic strategy for his architectural thinking. Yet, he is also a very good example of an architect using the whole range of the "discursive space" of the media, as Colomina characterised Mies's way of becoming a prominent architect¹². This includes "exhibitions, catalogues, architectural magazines, competitions, photographs, world's fairs, journalism, museum, art galleries, conferences, architectural schools", and even book layout in the case of Portoghesi. Yet, it is precisely this discourse of the media, which again creates effects and

interpretations, which on the one hand allows the architect to perform his design thinking, and on the other hand may lead to new interpretations by the audience, which are not controllable by the author.

In the 1960s and 1970s the Milanese publishing house Mondadori Electa launched a luxuriously designed book series, among them a complete *Storia universale dell'architettura* and many issues in particular on Italian architecture history, mainly monographs on Renaissance and Baroque architects. Two of them were written by Portoghesi: a 450 pages thick monograph on Francesco Borromini, Portoghesi's long-lasting and admired role-model, which came out in 1967¹³, and one year later an even thicker publication on *Roma Barocca*, almost 600 pages¹⁴.

Portoghesi's intention is clear: rehabilitating architecture's past and in particular the architecture of Roman baroque in a historically serious and even scientific manner. Apart from the comprehensive text body the books are richly illustrated. One encounters many of the original drawings, also drawings of architectural details, partly reprinted for the first time in first class quality on paperboard, and additionally especially produced isometric drawings by the author, which help to understand the spatial complexity of Baroque architecture. But above all: also especially taken photographs, overwhelming and breathtaking.

Interestingly enough, Portoghesi does not explain their function. It is also impossible to find out which photographs were taken by whom. Only in the American edition of *Roma Barocca* (published in 1970) there is a short notice that Portoghesi himself took a majority of them. And in the Borromini monograph a short list of names of photographers at least refers to the fact that additional photographers have been commissioned for the book. However, in all editions there is no illustration list, which would allow the reader to link every single picture to its author.



f2_Paolo Portoghesi

view from the lantern of Sant'Ivo by Francesco Borromini, showing unfamiliar fragments of the building and the urban context: a dizzying perspective, which can be taken only by the camera

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Since the photographs are being presented separately as monumental picture volume in the book, it seems obvious that their purpose is opposed to the text and the drawings: not a scientific but rather an immersive one. They enable the reader to freely browsing through them, reinforced by the fact that the black and white large size photographs of very good quality –in technical and in artistic terms– deviate from architectural photography quite strongly. Usually architectural photography seeks to imitate the standards of architectural drawing; that is why the most of them were taken as orthogonal projection or from a 30-60 degree angle, avoiding people or other objects, which might disturb the purity of the picture scene. Photographs of details show typically joints, profiles, openings (doors, windows) etc. In the Portoghesi books one encounters something completely different. One type of photograph overwhelms the readers by dramatic wide-angled perspectives, which are seemingly taken from the ground floor up to the vaulted spaces of churches or staircases. They look as if the space itself is breathing. The other type takes close-ups from very oblique angles and even extremely daring standpoints (f2), which can only be taken by the camera itself (by means of an additional tool such as an extension stick). They show seemingly arbitrarily fragmented details of façades, walls, windows, spaces etc. and suggest that experiencing baroque space might be a thrilling, a confusing, even a scary event. Comparable to the collages by Mies, those photographs do not merely represent baroque architecture, but rather perform it in a truly modern fashion since it is very unlikely that Borromini himself could see his architecture that way.

Moreover, Portoghesi's engagement with the "discursive space" of the media went even further. In particular in the American edition of *Roma Barocca* those performative effects become strengthened and even extended by the layout. The photographs are placed on a black font, and the alternating rhythm of panorama and close-up pictures, which also very often ignores or suppresses the middle ground, creates an almost cinematographic effect, while browsing through the voluptuous volume of photographs.



f3. Photographs of interior rooms of Palazzo Barberini by Francesco Borromini

carefully paired through the layout. Spread from: Paolo Portoghesi, Francesco Borromini, Milano, Electa Editrice, 1967 (photograph not mentioned)



f4_Layout staccato of details of the façade of Palazzo Barberini

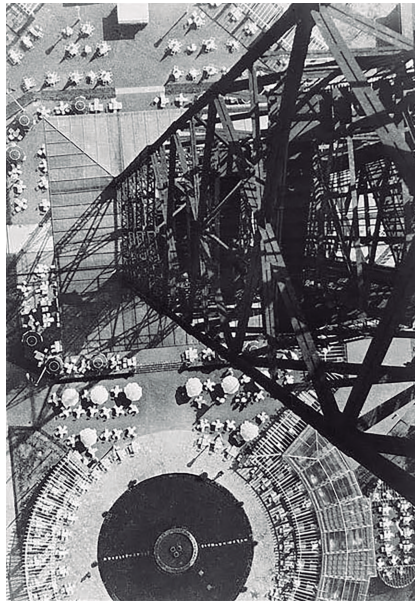
Spread from: Paolo Portoghesi, Francesco Borromini, Milano, Electa Editrice, 1967 (photograph not mentioned)

Since there is no graphic designer mentioned, it cannot be excluded that Portoghesi himself was partly in charge of the picture editing of the books. He probably pursued a visual concept that he later introduced as postmodern strategy in one of his monographs. To him architecture has to be born “out of architecture” (and not derived from technical functions), therefore it is first and foremost necessary to learn the visual repertoire of architecture. In order to appropriate the historical material for the design process he exploits a visual technique derived from film. “Lap dissolves” belongs to the post-production process of film editing and might be used as for a book layout as well. It is “the technique of allowing the end of one scene to overlap the beginning of the next scene by fading out the former while fading in the latter”¹⁵. In *Roma Barocca* and in the Borromini monograph there are a lot of examples: pictures of the same building paired side by side, one looks very obliquely from below, the other from above; pictures of interior spaces placed in juxtaposition, one seems to fade from a bright room in the foreground into a dark room in the background and the other vice versa (f3); close assemblies of pictures with different formats all showing the same façade in different details and from different standpoints – a confusing staccato, which passes over the dynamic and irritating effects of the curvilinear forms of baroque architecture on the readers (f4). It seems obvious that Portoghesi wants us to learn to see photographically by constantly zooming in, zooming out and by eventually overlapping families of images in order to “indicate possible, mysterious genetic connections ... to investigate the birth of daughter architectures and the possibility of drawing without complexes from the inheritance of collective memory”¹⁶. Referring also to Gilles Deleuze’s notion of

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immanent difference through repetition Portoghesi proposes film and photography as seemingly perfect instruments to overcome the deficiencies of modernism, in particular modernism's ignorance towards architecture's past.

Yet, the effects and techniques Portoghesi applied in his books are all modern. Anti-perspectival montage or collage techniques, which link directly pictures, details, different formats etc. together, have been invented as artistic tools in the beginning of the 20th century. In Mies's collages most of them are present, referring to the visual discourse of his time. Also the effect, when the photograph is not dedicated to the object photographed but rather to the rules and possibilities of the camera, has been described and explained by several theoreticians and artists already in the 1920s. Franz Roh, an art historian and photographer, who published together with graphic designer Jan Tschichold one of the first theoretical treatises on the "Photo-eye", connects the effect, when the camera takes its pictures from an almost vertiginous position, directly with the brand-new visual experiences in elevators and airplanes¹⁷. And László Moholy-Nagy was one of the first, who elaborated a comprehensive photographic practice of the "new vision". To him photography should not imitate painting, but rather exploit the technical and artistic means of the camera (**f5**). It was mainly him, who exemplified how to look "photographically" and how to create an "optical reality"¹⁸, whose alienating effects have been even assigned to surrealism. On a more abstract level, theoreticians such as Walter Benjamin or Roland Barthes also made clear that modern photography usually has as its central issue the photographic seeing and disguises the object. Benjamin called it the "optical unconsciousness"¹⁹.



f5_László Moholy-Nagy, view from the radio tower in Berlin
1928 (Ó Bildrecht, Vienna, 2016)

But what is most astonishing, Portoghesi does not refer to Sigfried Giedion's classic work *Space, Time and Architecture*²⁰. Eventually Giedion theorised baroque architecture as the historical predecessor of modern topics such as "time" and "space" in architecture. Giedion employed the undulating wall –according to him the "great invention" of Borromini who applied it for the first time to the façade of San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane in Rome– as a conceptual model, which has the power to "mold space" and to create a synthesis between inside and outside²¹. But above all, Giedion also introduced a new visual concept in his writings: influenced by Moholy-Nagy and the new Bauhaus-photography he used photographs (some of them taken by himself) not as a mere illustrative tool²². In his books one encounters daring camera standpoints, seemingly arbitrary details, even collages and superimpositions, in order to prove visually that modernism's central motif was "space-time".

Yet, in the 1960s all these techniques have become familiar (and this might be also one of the reasons, why Portoghesi did not refer to their modernist origins), and indeed, the postmodern discourse has changed their meaning as well. What once was called "seeing photographically" became the "photographic gaze", the criticism of the whole range of the social-political context of photography. As long as photographs or theoreticians fought for the acceptance of photography as a work of art, "seeing photographically" was a matter of traditional aspects of representative images: composition, proportion, contrasts, figure-ground etc. Yet, shifting the focus on the production of images, including the observer, who was to be considered as a co-producer, changed the status and the meaning of photographs. In Liz Wells's words: "paradoxically, just as photography had become accepted as a modern art practice [...] so postmodern artists started to appropriate or pastiche the photographic or use photography to refer to popular culture"²³.



f6_László Moholy-Nagy

Lago Maggiore, 1930 (Ó Bildrecht, Vienna, 2016)

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f7_Benedetta Barzini in suit by Mila

Ugo Mulas, 1969. Fashion photography in the 1960s started to fetishise the objects photographed

Since the 1960s one major platform for this popular culture in photography became fashion and advertisement. Presumably the most of the professional photographers commissioned for the *Electa* series also worked for advertisement campaigns and/or fashion magazines. And also Portoghesi himself –unconscious or not– was seemingly influenced by the increasing ubiquity of fashion photography and its abandonment of the frozen pose in the 1950s²⁴. It adopted seemingly the visual technique of fragmentising objects or bodies, which in modernism made out of photography a work of art (f6), and turned it successively to a voyeuristic and a fetishising gaze (f7). Yet, the postmodern discourse that criticised the visual regime of the male gaze, focused now on the body and its adjustment to commercial constraints and sexual obsessions, whereby the inherent aesthetic techniques of fashion photography have been pushed a little bit in the background. The books by Portoghesi might therefore be seen exactly at the intersection between two aesthetic discourses. Seen from an architectural standpoint, Portoghesi used the whole range of modernist visual aesthetics in order to create a “postmodern” consciousness for the history of architecture. Yet, since his intention seems to be seduction, it might be possible as well to look at the photographs quite differently. Imagining that the baroque buildings were (female) human beings, readers might feel as if they would immerse in the glamorous world of the *Alta Moda* or even a *Gentlemen's* magazine. Portoghesi's photographs are embedded in the visual discourse of the time, which explains their ambivalence but their enormous fascination and quality as well. They show the same tension between what is represented and the reality of the image as in the collages of Mies. Hence, in both cases it seems to be true, what Jean François Lyotard once summarised: “A work of art can become modern only if it is first postmodern”²⁵.

endnotes

1. This is the English translation of Walter Benjamin's essay: "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", in *Illuminations*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).
2. Beatriz Colomina, introduction to *ARCHITECTUREPRODUCTION*, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1988), 7
3. Victor Burgin, "Looking at Photographs", *Screen Education* 24 (1977), 17-24.
4. For example Vilém Flusser pointed out that for photography the traditional dichotomy between realism and idealism does not exist anymore. Not the world outside is real, but the photographic image, since it owes its existence the apparatus of the camera. See: Vilém Flusser, *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie*, (Berlin: Edition Flusser, 1983), 34-35.
5. Neil Levine, "The Significance of Facts: Mies's Collages up Close and Personal", *Assemblage* 37 (Dec. 1998): 77-101.
6. For a closer understanding of Mies as an expert of the media see: Beatriz Colomina, "Mies Not", in *The Presence of Mies*, ed. Detlef Mertins (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1994), 192-221.
7. Neil Levine, "The Significance of Facts: Mies's Collages up Close and Personal", 79.
8. Neil Levine, "The Significance of Facts", p. 79.
9. See Vilém Flusser, *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie*, 10.
10. Beatriz Colomina, introduction to *ARCHITECTUREPRODUCTION*, 10.
11. Beatriz Colomina, "Mies Not", 208.
12. Beatriz Colomina, "Mies Not", 213.
13. Paolo Portoghesi, *Francesco Borromini* (Milano: Electa Editrice, 1967).
14. Paolo Portoghesi, *Roma Barocca* (Milano: Electa Editrice, 1968).
15. *Collins English Dictionary – Complete and Unabridged*, 12th ed. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014).
16. Francesco Moschino (ed.), *Paolo Portoghesi. Progetti e disegni 1949-1979* (Firenze: Centro Di, 1979), 18.
17. Franz Roh and Jan Tschichold, *Foto-Auge* (Stuttgart: Fritz Wedekind & Co., 1929), 6.
18. Andreas Haus, "Die Präsenz des Materials", in *Das Neue Sehen. Von der Fotografie am Bauhaus zur Subjektiven Fotografie*, ed. Rainer K. Wick (Munich: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1991), 71.
19. Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner Reproduzierbarkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 42
20. Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture. The Growth of a New Tradition* (Cambridge/Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954 (1941)).
21. Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture*, pp. 110-121; see also Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen, "Reading Aalto through the Baroque: Constituent Facts, Dynamic Pluralities, and Formal Latencies", in *The Baroque in Architectural Culture 1880-1980*, ed. Andrew Leach, John Macarthur and Maarten Delbeke (London/New York: Routledge, 2015), 139-150, esp. 142.
22. In 1928 Sigfried Giedion published *Bauen in Frankreich – Bauen in Eisen – Bauen in Eisenbeton* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1928), which includes photographs by himself and was layouted by László Moholy-Nagy.
23. Liz Wells, "Introduction to part four 'Photography and the Postmodern'", in *The Photography Reader* (London/New York: Routledge, 2003), 149.
24. Stephen Bull, *Photography*, (London/New York: Routledge, 2010), 149-153.
25. Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 79.

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